

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 105 NO. 2 SPRING 2021



BIRDATHON 2021: THE PANDEMIC CAN'T STOP US!

BY LINDA CARLONI

Birdathon is back! COVID-19 and its distancing rules have changed how we live and bird, but our popular Birdathon fundraiser has returned for spring 2021 in an exciting new format. Since the group field trips of previous Birdathons remain off-limits, our Birdathon Committee came up with not one but three creative alternatives.

CONTINUED on page 3



Rose-breasted Grosbeak.
David Assmann



Black-headed Grosbeak.

HARBINGERS OF SPRING BIRDATHON

BY PAM YOUNG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Flowering dogwoods, departing Hermit Thrushes, and arriving Black-headed Grosbeaks are among the many harbingers of springtime in our Bay Area. Many resident bird species shift their energy to focus on their mate or attract someone new. Our local California Towhees are emboldened to claim territory and vocalize less in a conversational tone and more in a tone of announcement. Males glare at prospective rivals before elevating their encounter to a towhee version of a shouting match. By late spring, their rivalry may escalate to

actual physical sparring. Watch two male towhees invade each other's social bubble, bills agape, in a bracing posture, and suddenly explode in a frenzied rushing assault. Fortunately, towhees generally retreat well before causing serious physical injury and all will be forgiven by August. But the breeding season is changing for many bird species.

As our region and planet face the climate crisis, fire season lengthens and sea level rise intensifies. Sudden weather shifts threaten the survival of many bird species

that cannot rapidly adapt to extreme meteorologic events. Unless we protect valuable transitional upland habitat, shoreline birds such as the endangered Ridgway's Rail will be stranded on their marsh habitat islands with no retreat from rising seas. Saving just one mature redwood from being chopped down preserves an entire biotic community, along with ecosystem services that sequester carbon and clean our air, soil, and water for free!

Golden Gate Audubon Society collaborates with other Audubon chapters and environmental stakeholders to protect our valuable natural habitat and educate our community about the benefits of nature-based solutions and living shorelines. Just as we humans contend with an unprecedented pandemic, birds must endure the persistent threats of habitat loss and fragmentation. Your support of Golden Gate Audubon helps us fortify our outreach and restore habitat.

For Golden Gate Audubon cognoscenti, spring also signifies our popular Birdathon fundraising month—a time to share phenomenal birding experiences while supporting GGAS. However, this year is different because of Covid. We're featuring a virtual birding extravaganza, a socially-distanced Christmas-in-May count, and an online Adventure Auction. Please join us in one or all of these events! Like the ebullient energy of the resident nesting Dark-eyed Juncos in our backyard planter, we delight in another season of new life that reinvigorates our cherished traditions. We are so grateful for your generous donations and volunteer involvement, both during Birdathon and throughout the year.

NEWS BRIEFS

Announcing Our New Executive Director— Glenn Phillips

Just as this issue went to press, we were delighted to finalize the hire of Glenn Phillips as the new Executive Director of Golden Gate Audubon Society. Raised in the East Bay, Glenn has extensive experience in bird conservation and nature education, including seven years as executive director of New York City Audubon. We look forward to introducing him to you in the next issue of *The Gull* and at upcoming Zoom events.

2020 San Francisco Christmas Bird Count Results

While our 2020 Oakland Christmas Bird Count was cancelled due to Covid restrictions, San Francisco held a socially-distanced count with fewer participants than usual. The S.F. count nevertheless tallied over 68,000 birds, the highest number in 30 years. It found 189 species, just two fewer than last year's record 191. Best bird of the count was a Black Storm-Petrel, spotted by Josiah Clark, flying 100 yards offshore at Crissy Field.

Renew Your Membership for 2021

Spring's here! Renew your Golden Gate Audubon membership now for 2021, if you haven't done so already. Although affiliated with National Audubon, we're an independent nonprofit that must raise all our own money: Membership dues are a key part of that. Dues-paying members receive discounts on birding classes, free admission to our Speaker Series, and the satisfaction of being part of a community that loves and protects Bay Area birds. Join or renew at goldengateaudubon.org/join.

BIRDATHON 2021 from page 1

Triple your springtime birding fun with Birdathon Virtual Field Trips, a Christmas-in-May Bird Count, and an online Adventure Auction.

Virtual Field Trips

You guessed it—via Zoom! Some of our best field trip leaders will share slides of their favorite birding spots, explain how to get there and what paths to take, show target species, and provide site-specific tips. Eight virtual field trips will take you from the Sage-Grouse scrub of northeastern California and the locked gates of Hayward Shoreline to the imperiled sink of the Salton Sea. No long car drives, sloshing through icy puddles, or rising before dawn—just great virtual birding and the info you need to visit those places on your own.

We're also offering two skill-building virtual workshops—one to sharpen your ID skills for look-alike species and one on spotting rarities. Visit goldengateaudubon.org/Birdathon2021 for info and sign-up for all our Zoom events, which will take place from late March through late April.

Christmas in May Bird Count

Of course Zoom can never fully replace being in the field. Since COVID prevented an Oakland Christmas Bird Count this year, Oakland CBC co-leads Dawn Lemoine and Viviana Wolinsky suggested a Christmas-in-May count! David Assmann and Siobhan Ruck joined the effort to organize a San Francisco event too.



Birdathon field trip to Hayward Shoreline in 2017.

Eight virtual field trips will take you from the Sage-Grouse scrub of northeastern California and the locked gates of Hayward Shoreline to the imperiled sink of the Salton Sea.

Both Christmas-in-May counts will take place on Saturday, May 8th, eBird's Global Big Day. Experience the excitement, competition, and camaraderie of a CBC—only during spring migration! Up to 10 people can sign up per area, with the areas mirroring those used for the Oakland and San Francisco CBCs. Unlike a CBC, there will *not* be official team leaders. Participants must bird within the defined area, solo or in smaller groups consistent with health guidelines. Sign up and record your sightings in eBird to contribute to community science.

Since Birdathon is our main fundraiser of the year, we encourage you to ask friends and family to sponsor your area group with a tax-deductible donation. If they pledge a certain amount for each species you find, it adds to the suspense and fun! We'll have prizes for the area groups that raise the most money. See goldengateaudubon.org/christmas-in-may to sign up for the Christmas-in-May counts.

Birdathon Auction

Everyone's sick of sheltering in place, so this year's online auction will focus on fun experiences to enjoy once lockdown is over. Bid on a South Africa-themed dinner with

a slide show of African birds; an expert-guided botanical walk; a small airplane tour of Bay Area restoration sites; vacations in Portland and Lake Tahoe; and other unique items. Bidding opens on May 1: see 32auctions.com/ggas.

Birdathon has always been an important community-based fundraising event for Golden Gate Audubon Society. 2021 is no exception. All events will have a small charge, and we're hoping that Christmas-in-May participants will support GGAS by getting friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances to sponsor them.

We're so grateful for the generous support of our members and donors through the difficult pandemic year of 2020. We hope this health crisis is nearing its end but, in the meantime, we're relying on you—members, donors, and friends of Bay Area birds—to make Birdathon a financial success.

Birdathon 2021 promises to be a highlight of the birding year. Join us virtually, in person, through a sponsorship or auction bid, or all of the above!

For information on all Birdathon 2021 events, see goldengateaudubon.org/Birdathon2021.



Janet Carpinelli

Volunteers remove trash from Oakland's MLK Jr. Shoreline and assist with an Eco-Education field trip before the pandemic.

HONORING OUR AMAZING VOLUNTEERS

BY JANET CARPINELLI

Covid-19 may have curtailed our activities in 2020, but it didn't stop us from honoring our fabulous volunteers! We held a Zoom gathering on January 28 to honor Golden Gate Audubon Society volunteers and present our annual awards:

The Elsie Roemer Conservation Award went to **Allen Fish** for his scientific and educational work with raptors through the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, and to **Rue Mapp**, founder of Outdoor Afro, the nationwide nonprofit that connects people of color with the outdoors.

The Paul Coval Education Award went to **Anthony De Cicco** for his 20 years as a nature educator for children, especially those from underserved communities, and to **Rusty Scalf** for a lifetime of outstanding adult education, field trips, and presentations at birding events.

Several of our most dedicated volunteer leaders presented an overview of the activities they've spearheaded over the past two years:

Maureen Lahiff: Adult Education, including our popular birding classes and Lake Merritt Docent Program.

Steve Lombardi: GGAS's field trip program, which before the pandemic provided about 200 free bird walks each year.

Corny Foster: Monthly habitat restoration for threatened Snowy Plovers at Crissy Field.

Leora Feeney and Marjorie Powell: Friends of the Alameda Wildlife Reserve, restoring habitat for endangered California Least Terns and other birds on land that was formerly part of the Alameda Naval Air Station.

Laura Cremin and Whitney Grover: East Bay and San Francisco Conservation Committees, advocating for policies to protect bird habitat and migration flyways.

Clay Anderson, our Youth Education Manager: Adult volunteers help connect children in low-income schools with nature through our Eco-Education program.

Susan Mullaney: Habitat maintenance for White-crowned Sparrows at the Bison Paddock in Golden Gate Park.

Noreen Weeden: New "Plants For Birds" initiative by GGAS and the Yerba Buena chapter of the California Native Plant Society. Each year the partnership will promote four bird-friendly native plants for inclusion in gardens and open spaces. (See story on page 6.)

One highlight of the Zoom gathering was a slideshow of our many volunteer programs. You can view it on the Volunteer page of our website at goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.

And if you're a GGAS volunteer...we have some tokens of our appreciation waiting for you—a custom-designed cotton bandana and pin! If you haven't received them already, please send your address to jcarpinelli@goldengateaudubon.org.

Spring is a wonderful time to start new activities. Whether you're interested in conservation advocacy, hands-on gardening to provide habitat for wildlife, or opening kids' eyes to the wonders of nature, we've got a place for you! Check our website's Volunteer page for upcoming opportunities, or email me, GGAS's Manager of Volunteer Services, at the address above. Together we can make a difference for birds and for our Bay Area community.



Lazuli Bunting.

Bob Gunderson

BIRD SOUND RECORDING FOR CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION

GREG BUDNEY

ONLINE

Thursday, April 15
7 p.m. program
Zoom

Learn how audio recording is used for conservation and research—from portable recording systems in tropical bird conservation, to autonomous recorders for monitoring birds, to automated playback systems for reintroduction of threatened birds into the field. We'll also discuss the ethics of playing back bird calls. This presentation will feature many good-fidelity recordings that contain not only high frequencies but low-pitched sounds that may not be audible on a laptop computer's internal speaker. We recommend you listen with high-fidelity stereo headphones or earbuds.

Greg Budney is the former Audio Curator of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds, the world's largest collection of wildlife sound recordings. He is also an experienced bird sound recordist and has produced numerous audio guides to sounds of birds of the Americas. For over 30 years, he's conducted an annual recording training workshop at San Francisco State University's Sierra Nevada Field Campus.

ALCATRAZ'S BREEDING SEABIRDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

LYDIA D'AMICO AND
ZOE BURR

ONLINE

Thursday, May 20
7 p.m. program
Zoom

Dive into the world of Alcatraz seabirds! Learn about species that typically breed on the island and the threats they face from climate change and our urban environment. Located in a unique position within the San Francisco Bay, Alcatraz Island is one of only two estuarine breeding colonies for Brandt's Cormorants.

Lidia D'Amico is the Alcatraz Biologist for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Her expertise includes management of endangered avifauna populations. Zoe Burr, a marine ecologist who specializes in seabird ecology, has worked with the Farallon Institute to study breeding ecology and disturbance of seabirds on Alcatraz Island.



Andy Reago

Brandt's Cormorants.

MADAGASCAR'S FRAGILE MAGIC

ERIC SCHROEDER

ONLINE

Thursday, June 17
7 p.m. program
Zoom

Take a virtual tour of this amazing island, home to 308 species of birds, including 108 endemics. Endemism isn't limited to individual species but extends to six endemic avian families: mesites, asities, vangas, tetras, ground rollers, and the cuckoo roller. We'll explore Madagascar's varied ecosystems, from northern lowland rainforests to the weird and wonderful spiny forest of the southwest. Along the way we'll discuss threats to the island's incredible biodiversity.

Eric Schroeder was the Faculty Director of Study Abroad at UC Davis. He is currently a coordinator of GGAS's Travel Program and serves as president of the GGAS Board of Directors.



Eric Schroeder

Helmet Vanga, Madagascar

GGAS's monthly Speaker Series is now online!

To receive email alerts with links to each Zoom presentation, email us at mturner@goldengateaudubon.org and put "speaker series" in the subject line.



Left and right: Coast Red-flowering Currant and beach strawberry by Noreen Weeden. Center: Anna's Hummingbird feeding on California fuchsia by Rick Lewis.

PLANTS FOR BIRDS: A NEW GGAS INITIATIVE

Make your backyard more welcoming to wildlife without spending thousands of dollars on a complete landscaping overhaul! Our new Plants for Birds initiative will highlight four native plants each year that support birds and butterflies and can easily, gradually, be added to your garden. This is a joint project of Golden Gate Audubon Society and the Yerba Buena chapter of the California Native Plant Society.

The 2021 selections include a tree, vine, bush, and ground cover:

Coast Red-flowering Currant (*Ribes sanguineum* var. *glutinosum*). This awesome plant blooms in the winter and attracts Anna's Hummingbirds, the Satyr Comma butterfly, and the Ceanothus Silkmoth.

California Coffeeberry (*Frangula californica*). You've probably seen photos of Cedar Waxwings chowing down on red berries. Coffeeberry, along with Toyon, is one of those bushes. Gray Hairstreak and Pale Swallowtail Butterflies also depend upon coffeeberry.

California Honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*). This native vine with pink flowers appeals to Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds and Chestnut-backed Chickadees, as well as the Variable Checkerspot butterfly.

Beach Strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*). This hardy ground cover grows in sandy soil. Its small berries provide food for California Towhees and Song Sparrows and are a draw for the *Clepsid fucana* moth.

Native plants are important to bird populations both directly and indirectly. Many birds rely on seeds and fruits from native plants for sources of energy. Meanwhile, over one-third of birds in the U.S. eat insects, many of which in turn survive on native plants.

Researchers have documented co-evolutionary strategies in which most insects require specific plants. Exotic plants from Asia or Europe often don't provide the nourishment needed by local butterflies and other insects, while many plants sold as pest-free have chemicals in their tissues that repel insects.

Kathy Kramer—founder of the annual Bringing Back the Natives garden tour—used research by entomologist Doug Tallamy to look at West Coast plant-insect associations. GGAS volunteer Noreen Weeden drew on Kramer's data along with a CNPS database to evaluate San Francisco plant species and select this year's assortment of four native plants.

GGAS's San Francisco Conservation Committee reached out to nurseries in the city to see if they would stock these plants. In San Francisco, Cole Hardware, Bay Natives, Clement Nursery, and Flora Grubb may carry some or all of these featured plants. Outside the city, call your local nursery to see if they are available.

Fall and winter are typically planting season in our area, but it's not too early to start thinking about improving your garden this fall. You can learn more about this year's highlighted native plants at cnps-yerbabuena.org/plants-birds-program.

OSPREY NESTING SEASON BEGINS

Welcome back, Rosie! The female Osprey who co-starred in our live Osprey nest cam for four years has returned from wintering in the south to rejoin her mate Richmond. Watch our live video feed from the Richmond shoreline as they lay and incubate eggs and raise chicks: sfbayospreys.org.



DONATIONS

Thank you for joining our donor community.

Donations from January 1, 2021 through February 28, 2021.

With gratitude to every individual, business, and organization who made a recent donation. We are especially appreciative of all donations during the Coronavirus pandemic. Despite the impact to our in-person events, your donations and support have kept us going. Large or small, the gifts you send support our conservation, education, and member programs, and directly benefit the birds you love.

GOLDEN EAGLE (\$1000 and above)

Carol Baird & Alan Harper, Barbara Keck, Mary Kleinhenz, Mara Melandry

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Carol Baxter, Carson Cox, Amanda Hamilton, Sarah Paul

LEAST TERN (\$250 to \$499)

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F5 Networks (Jeffrey Gray)
FTI Networks (Patricia Itamoto)
Google (Sarah Chan, Jessica Turner)
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SVB (Tamara Morrish)
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GRANTS

Meriam Fund

GIFTS IN HONOR OF

Mielita Coats, in honor of Cici Vu
Charlotte Nolan, in honor of Steve Lombardi
Juliana Van Meter, in honor of the Walti family

GIFTS IN MEMORY OF

Virginia Rauth, in memory of Judy Denny

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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. You can join or renew on the website or through our Berkeley office.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward The Gull.

Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to ggas@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters.

Golden Gate Audubon Society

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This issue of The Gull was published April 2021.

Please know that we work hard to ensure the accuracy of this list. If your name has been omitted or misspelled, let us know at 510.843.2222.

www.goldengateaudubon.org

 The Gull is printed with soy-based inks on chlorine-free paper, 30% postconsumer waste content.

4 Honoring GGAS Volunteers

Even during a pandemic, Audubon volunteers continue restoring habitat and advocating for birds.

5 Speaker Series

Learn about the use of bird sound recording in conservation, Madagascar's fragile ecosystem, and Alcatraz's breeding seabirds.

6 Plants for Birds

These four native plants are perfect for birds and butterflies in San Francisco and nearby areas.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Allen Hirsch

American Avocets in breeding plumage.

AMERICAN AVOCET

BY BLAKE EDGAR

Emblematic of the changing season, come spring the American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*) has cast off its gray and white winter plumage and partially molted into breeding colors, with a warm cinnamon hue to the head, neck, and breast. The black-and-white wings remain the same, offering a consistent and conspicuous field mark to distinguish avocets among other shorebirds.

Wading gracefully on long, sky-blue legs through shallow water, an avocet sweeps its head swiftly side to side beneath the surface. The gently recurved bill with a needle tip—the female's bill has a slightly sharper curve—acts like a scythe cutting stalks of wheat.

This action helps the bird stir up invertebrates, including worms, clams, and aquatic insects, from the water and sediment. Learned by juveniles prior to fledging, scything serves as the dominant feeding strategy of adult avocets.

Along with American Avocet, the Black-necked Stilt is the other member of the family Recurvirostridae that breeds in North America. These two species are the most abundant breeding shorebirds in the San Francisco Bay estuary—a critically important location for migrating, overwintering, and breeding shorebirds that supports the largest breeding populations of stilts and avocets on the Pacific coast. Ephemeral desert wetlands in the Great Basin provide another important avocet breeding habitat.

Around San Francisco Bay, where avocets are resident throughout the year, peak nesting occurs from mid-April to mid-June. Avocets nest in small conspecific (same-species) colonies, keeping a few feet between neighboring pairs. They often nest in proximity to stilts or Forster's Terns. After prospecting potential nest sites, a monogamous mating pair scrapes a simple bowl on sparsely vegetated ground close to water. Both parents incubate the clutch, typically containing four eggs, for three to four weeks.

The parents stay with their brood for several weeks after hatching, when chicks must avoid predators such as striped skunk, raccoon and gray fox, among mammals, or California Gull, Common Raven, and Red-tailed Hawk. One study in the South Bay found a 93% mortality rate in radio-tagged avocet chicks, with over 40% of them killed by California Gulls.

Once breeding season ends, adult avocets undertake a complete feather molt, returning to their wintery white look until another spring arrives.